Trinity

By

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Michael W. Holland, Ph.D. LPC-S, LADAC, AADC, CCDP-D, IAADC, ICCDP-D

Founding Bishop
Anglican Church International

Owner

Holland Counseling of the Ozarks, LLC

Abstract

This essay presents the Holy Trinity as the ontological foundation of being and the inner pattern of the Church's life. Being, here, is being-in-relationship: God is one in three Persons, and the human person, made in the *imago Dei*, is constituted by communion with God and neighbor. Drawing on Vicki K. Black's *Welcome to the Church Year*, Robert W. Jenson's "The Trinity and Church Structure," the Oxford Bible Commentary on 1 Corinthians 13, the witness of Saint Augustine, and the doctrinal settlement of the Council of Nicaea, the essay paints a picture of the Church as the community in which the triune life is manifested in time. It moves through three movements. First, it asks what the Trinity is, recovering the patristic confession of one God in three Persons and identifying the Father as the source of our being, the Son as the truth and essence toward which we are called, and the Holy Spirit as the means by which we discern and actualize our nature. Second, it asks to what we are called, answering that we are called to being itself—life in Christ, in the unity and communion of the Holy Spirit—and that the Church is the body in which this calling is lived together. Third, it asks on what basis we so act, answering with 1 Corinthians 13: love is the form of every gift, and unconditional love of God and neighbor is the ground on which the Church's service rests. The essay closes with the threefold work into which the triune God calls every Christian—being, unity, reconciliation—and a prayer that the Church might be guided by the Spirit of Truth to manifest the Trinity in its life together.

TRINITY

Preface

According to Black:

> *"During the weeks (season after Pentecost), as the liturgical scholar Leonel Mitchell puts it, we celebrate "the time in which we actually live-the period between the Pentecost and the Second Advent." Two thousand years after the first Pentecost, the church still lives in this "in between" time before the fulfillment of the time of Christ's second coming" (Black 113). Further she claims, "On this first Sunday after Pentecost we celebrate the doctrine of the Trinity. … . Throughout Lent and Easter we have focused on the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. So it makes perfect sense for the church now to turn its attention to the fullness of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Black 114).*

The Trinity can be seen as the ontological foundation of Being – being-in-relationship - and the nature of the Church life. In what follows I attempt to paint a picture of the essential nature of the Church's life, which i8s to say its being, and for that matter what it is to be at all.

On the Holy Trinity

Jesus ascended into heaven and the Apostles were left to discern who Jesus was. Was Jesus God and if so then are there two, three gods? Their answer was Jesus was/is God. But what does this entail, more than one god? Black claims:

> *"The early Christians had discovered Jesus to be more than a kind of healer. After the resurrection and ascension they experienced him as somehow related to God, as somehow part of the Godhead, and they struggled to understand exactly how this could be. Jesus had spoken of God as his Father, and of himself as the Son. After Pentecost, they also knew the Holy Spirit as somehow residing within them, distinct from Jesus and God the Creator, and yet also part of God. Their Jewish tradition told them consistently and clearly that God was One, not two or three. So how could this be? What evolved was the doctrine of the Trinity, which attempted to summarize their*

> *experience of God, just as it describes our experience of God today" (Black 115).*

We have the answer formulated at the Council of Nicaea over 300 years after Jesus' death in the first line of the Nicene Creed "We believe in one God." There is one God, three Persons, of one being (or substance) with the Father. And today we celebrate the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three in one. But what is the Trinity? The topic for today, then, is the Trinity and I want to talk about the Trinity within the context of "calling" God's calling us, calling us to life. What, then, is the Trinity and to what are we called?

Exactly what the Trinity is many say is a mystery and, I suppose, we all have to come to terms with and have our own understanding of what it is. I believe the Trinity can be seen as ways we experience God in our lives, and our experience of Him points to our relationships with Him and each other.

First, however, let me set the stage by appealing to Saint Augustine. Saint Augustine said he could see the Trinity in all of God's creation – roughly, God the Father (Being), God the Son (divine wisdom, in creation form, essence, and order) and God the Holy Spirit (something like vitality).

When the drought of early Spring several years ago had almost killed a Magnolia tree in my mother's front yard, I watered it, fed it Epsom salt, and hoped it would survive. And according to Saint Augustine when I looked at it I can see God, the Holy Trinity. I see it is, being, God the Creator, I see that it is of a kind, of a particular essence, God the Son, and I see it attempting to realize its essence, God the Holy Spirit. And our experiencing God through His creation points to ways we experience and relate to God – He is the source of our being (God the Father), the Truth, Essence, our nature, to which we are to move (God the Son) – more about calling in a moment – and the means by which we discern and move toward actualizing our nature (God the Holy Spirit).

Now about calling:

We are called to being/life, life in and through Christ in the Unity/Communion of His Holy Spirit, (e.g., becoming what God intends for us, His Image in which He created/creates us). We are called to turn inward and discover our nature which just is God's Image in us, God in us, the Holy Trinity. Our discovery, our seeing of our essence – God the Son - by means of the gift of His Holy Spirit given us by God through Christ (the gift of discernment leading us into all truth) we are able to understand our nature, an understanding that entails action, movement to become, and we come into being (God the Father) by actualizing our nature – God in us – in act, by answering our call.

Actualizing our nature - God in us - in act, just is to manifest God in us to each other and all of God's creation, which is to say, proclaim, or, if you will, preach

the Word. And manifesting God in us to each other and all of God's creation just is what it is to be, to live, to have life in and through Christ in the Unity/Communion of His Holy Spirit. And this is manifest in our relations with each other, our living in peace with one another, as one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of God.

We are called by God to be, to being, to life, to life in Christ. And the Trinity, God's image in us, provides us with an understanding of what life in Christ looks like, how we will know we are alive. For we believe in **ONE** God. We are to be one in our relations with each other as the Persons of the Trinity are one God. The theme here, then, is ***Unity***. Now, since I/we cannot stand in relation to another person/others by my/ourselves/s, it follows that I/we can **be**, have **life**, **live**, only when I/we stand in a particular relationship with each other. But what sort of relation? How am I to ***be*** in relation to you? How are you to ***be*** in relation to me?

More later, for now, what seems clear is that we can be only in the context of our being with/in relation to each other, In Communion with one another, which is to say, in the context of the body of Christ, the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, that is us (and all God's creation). At Pentecost we celebrate the birth of the Church – the body of Christ here, namely us. We found, then, in the Gospel that we are called by Christ to continue His ministry, "As the Father has sent me, so now I send you" (John 20:21), and His bestowing on us the means by which to do that for which He has sent us – His Holy Spirit. St. Paul tells us, "Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

If there is anything that is central to what Christ did, it is service. At the heart of His ministry was serving God's creation and that includes us. We are called, then to serve each other and all of God's creation as Christ served/serves. But what sort of service? There is one Spirit through which or by means of which a variety of gifts are given – to some one kind of gift, to others another. And it is be means of that same Spirit, the *Spirit of Truth,* that we discern our gifts. Discern our gift(s) and we will find your service, that to which we are called.

Ok, so we are to serve each other by utilizing the gifts of His Grace given us by God through Christ. But what does our relationships of serving each other look like? What is the essential nature or character of our "serving" relationship, relationship of service?

Perhaps we can find out by looking to the result(s), that by which we will know we are on the right path when we see it (the result). But we have already said that the result is our unity, our being **one** Body of Christ in the world in the Unity/Communion of His Holy Spirit. What, however, does this look like in action?

Here, again, we can look to the Trinity to find the answer. We have already seen that God the Holy Trinity points to how we relate to God. He is the source of our being (God the Father), the Truth, Essence, our nature, to which we are to move (God the Son) and the means by which we discern, are motivated, and move toward actualizing our nature (God the Holy Spirit). So, when we serve each other in the ways for which our gifts are well suited, God, through us is for others the source of their being (the only example that comes to mind immediately here for me is providing food for those who hunger) [God the Father], thereby providing for their understanding [God the Son] and their inspiration to act in accordance with the Truth (understanding) [God the Holy Spirit].

But on what basis do we so act?

[1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (King James Version)]

" [1]Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels,
and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or
a tinkling cymbal.
[2]And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand
all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all
faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not
charity, I am nothing.
[3]And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and
though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity,
it profiteth me nothing.
[4]Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not;
charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,
[5]Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is
not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;
[6]Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;
[7]Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things,
endureth all things.
[8]Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies,
they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall
cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.
[9]For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.
[10]But when that which is perfect is come, then that which
is in part shall be done away.
[11]When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a
child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I
put away childish things.
[12]For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to
face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as
also I am known.

> [13]And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

According to the Oxford Bible Commentary:

> "The first section (vv. 103) is made up of three conditional clauses, each complemented by a devastating statement of worthlessness. The first imagines the possession of all the possible gifts of speech which were so highly prized in Corinth, 'tongues of angels' perhaps describing the imagined content of 'speaking in tongues'. Without love, which can make such communication purposeful and beneficial to others, all such gifts, although genuinely gifts of the Spirit are mere noise ('noisy gong' refers to the bronze products for which Cornith was famous). Similarly the powers of prophecy, knowledge, and faith (cf. 12:6-10; Mk 11:20-4) are valueless without love (v.2). In fact, most challenging of all, even apparent acts of charity and self-sacrifice gain nothing at all, unless they are motivated and controlled by love. … .
>
> … . For him, the only characteristic of the present which is final and complete is love: 'love never ends' (v.8). … . The abiding qualities, which already have a firm purchase on eternal truths, are faith, hope, and love (not the Corinthians' vaunted 'knowledge'). But the greatest of these, as a reflection of God's own character [and thus our character/ essential nature] is love (v. 13; cf. Rom 5:8)." (Barton and Muddiman 1128–29).]

And that love, more specifically, love of God/Trinity, is to be the ultimate source of our action is clear when the Gospel reading is understood in the context of the Christ's commandment for us to love one another as He loves us.

God's Holy Spirit just is His Spirit of unconditional love and forgiveness. What is to define our service to each other is unconditional love for each other out of our love for God, the Holy Trinity. Thus, out of our love for God we manifest the Trinity in all we do by our love for each other. And in so doing we become a community - our living in Communion/one with each other and through each other with God as the three Persons of the Trinity are One - in which the defining experience of all its members is that of God the Holy Trinity, living in Unity and Godly Love!

According to Black, “Experientially, we already know God as Trinity through our loving relationships with God, ourselves, and other people. The theologian Mark McIntosh speaks of the Trinity as part of this essential pattern of human relationships as well as of the relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit within God:

> ‘The patterns and movement of our common life are sacraments of something greater and deeper: that pattern of eternal loving, giving, and receiving that is the only fruitful ground of all our relationships. Our yearning for communion with beauty in all its many forms whispers to us of the Holy Spirit, who would draw us into Communion itself: the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is God’s own life.’

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that God is not a “cosmic principle” but a communion of love among persons) (Black 115–16). And it is into this Communion of love among persons that God is calling us today.

St. Paul tells us that all have gifts of service from God. And there is one God that activates our gifts of service to others. And though there are many people there is one Body of Christ in the world of which they are a member. By acting on the gift(s) of the Holy Spirit out of love for God and thus serving others in way(s) for which our gifts are well suited we promote the health and unity of the Body of Christ as a totality. And when we thus actualize our nature – become who we are created to be in God’s Image, we are ONE in Spirit, the Spirit of God manifest, as part of ONE body, the body of Christ as a totality, and are thus joined together in ONE manifestation of God in all time present and past. And we see (God the Son) that totality and feel (God the Holy Spirit) our unity with all of apostles, martyrs, and all saints past and present as part of ONE expression of that totality the Body of Christ in all time, and in and only in that expression we are, being, God the Father, and live in the Communion which is God’s own life..

We are thus reconciled with God and participate in the His Divine natures. Black notes, “Pritchard reminds us that God’s life is a relationship of love, so that when we draw near to that life in worship [worship of loving each other as we are loved by Him], we, too, are drawn “ever more deeply into love.” On this Sunday of the church year we explore, however dimly and inadequately, the inner life of God and are thus drawn not only into the intellectually challenging mystery of who God is, but also into the loving communion of the persons of the Trinity” (Black 116).

On the Relationships of Persons

1. “Christians have been given a “model” of true communion, and this is the communion that is actual in God, in that God is triune. …Thus … that God’s triunity is the ground of the church’s structured being. We are so to work on the shape of the church that when the world sees the church it need not squint to see the triunity of God” (Jenson 16–17).

2. “…, that “every word and deed of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, was a revelation of the inner life which he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit.” …. . The earthly career of Jesus reveals, as the action of one agent of God’s immanent triune life, not the sheer “procession” of a Logos as such, but the incarnate Jesus’ own participation in the triune life” (Jenson 17–19). [Thus, we, following Christ’s example, through Him participate in God’s Divine life, the life the Father has with the Son and the Holy Spirit.]

3. “This divine community, in our text, is a perfect love between differentiated persons. … . That is, each of them finds himself in what the other receives from Him. [So, we too, find ourselves in what others receive from us.] … . The three are lovers, and so genuine free doers of life together. But that does not mean what we are likely to take it to mean, that each is free from the others. Rather, as the great scholastics teach us, there is each of the three only in that he is with and for and from the other two: … . [Thus we are only to the extent that we are with and for and from each other, as it is in this way we share in the divine nature of God (the Holy Trinity), commune with God, are reconciled with God.] According to St. Thomas, it is the very divinity of a divine person that he has no subsistence other than his relation to other divine persons” (Jenson 19). [It follows, then that we are only in our relations with each other, and only through our relations are we with and for and from God.

4. “God’s act to reconcile us to himself is nothing so uninteresting as forgiving us or liberating us or empowering us simply as some of his creatures out here. God reconciles us by making us into himself, into the community that he himself lives as Father and Son and Spirit. … . God’s reconciliation is not just that he makes us better human creatures. He will make us perfect human creatures, and he will do so by incorporating us as additional personal subjects of his own life – as the whole church once had the courage to say, by “deifying” us” (Jenson 20).

5. “Humanity’s destiny is to live in a community of perfect love between differentiated persons. This love is generatively enacted as the love of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. …, and therefore just such love must be the being also of our human community with one another. We will be as different from one another as the Father is different from the Son, and just so we will be perfectly united to one another. Indeed, there will be nothing to any one of us but what she or he is from and

for all the rest of us; we too will then be given perfect co-dependence" (Jenson 20). [Again, it is by actualizing the unity of the Trinity that the church, us, becomes divine, shares in His divine nature and is thus reconciled with God through Christ in the Unity/Communion of His Holy Spirit]

6. Finally, "… text: "The People of God, made one by sharing in the divine unity, is … 'a sacrament or sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity.'" [And this just is to proclaim the good news of salvation through Christ in the Unity/Communion of His Holy Spirit.] It is the church's sharing in the divine community that makes her a community. … . Humanity's participation in the triune life is the final goal of God's history; … . But now we hear that the church, in her communal unity, already anticipates humanity's life in the triune God. Therefore the shape of the church's unity can reveal to all humanity its own fulfillment, its final unity with God and so with itself" (Jenson 20–21).

Being, Unity, Reconciliation, Prayer:

In the collect for today we noted that "you have given to us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of your divine Majesty to worship the Unity: [and asked that] Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see you in your one and eternal glory" We do this by manifesting the Trinity in our relations with each other, which entails our individually manifesting the image of the Trinity in which we are created – thus our being. Manifest the Trinity in our interactions by unconditionally loving each other as we are unconditionally loved by God leads to the church as a totality manifesting the Trinity, proclaiming the Word in the Unity/Communion of His Holy Spirit.

But this requires our being guided by His Holy Spirit of Truth given us by God through Christ, which we celebrated last Sunday at Pentecost; and, worship, which just is acting in ways His Holy Spirit directs us in our relations with each other. This just is to manifest the Trinity in our interactions. We are thus vehicles through which He is glorified in His Holy Spirit. For in His Holy Spirit of unconditional love and forgiveness we are united as ONE as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are ONE, the Holy Trinity. And we are thereby reconciled with God and live by participating in His life, the life of the Holy Trinity.

Let us pray,

God grant us to be guided by your Spirit of Truth that we may see and manifest the Trinity in our interaction and be thus reconciled with each other and made one as you are one, a living Sacrament, and through one another, reconciled and made one with you in and through Christ in the Unity/Communion of your Holy Spirit. For with your co-eternal Son and Holy Spirit, you are one God, one Lord, in Trinity of Persons and in Unity of Being: and we celebrate – *by our so living in unity, as your one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church* – the one and equal glory of you, O Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Works Cited

Barton, John, and John Muddiman, editors. The Oxford Bible Commentary. Oxford University Press, 2001.

Black, Vicki. Welcome to the Church Year: An Introduction to the Seasons of the Episcopal Church. Morehouse Publishing, 2004.

The Holy Bible. King James Version, Oxford University Press, 1769.

Jenson, Robert W. "The Trinity and Church Structure." Shaping Our Future: Challenges for the Church in the Twenty-First Century, edited by J. S. Freeman, Crowley, 1994.